

NOTES ON THE HABITS OF THE MOOSE IN THE FAR NORTH OF
BRITISH AMERICA IN 1865.

BY

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The Moose is common over the whole country as far north as the borders of the barren grounds. In the valley of the Yukon, and on the west side of the Rocky Mountains, Moose are particularly numerous, and continue so westward to Bering Strait. There are particular localities, however, where Moose are rarely, if ever, seen. For instance, so far as I have heard, they never approach the shores of Hudson's Bay near York factory. They are very rarely killed in the vicinity of Fort Rae, although they are quite numerous at Big Island and along this side of the lake.

The females have one or two young at a time. They have sometimes, but very rarely, been killed with three young inside; but no one, Indian or white, that I have known, ever saw a female followed by three sucklings or yearlings. For this I have never heard a reason assigned. Since the female has four teats giving milk, one would suppose that she might suckle as many as three young.

The food of the Moose consists of willows, small birch-trees and shrubs, and also of grass and hay. Sometimes two or three will pass an entire winter near certain small lakes or large grassy swamps, in which they feed, scraping off the snow with their feet. In winter, when no water is to be had, they eat snow freely. In winter also the females are most sought after, because they are the fattest. In summer the male is best for the same reason. In fall, when the females are rutting, the males become very emaciated.

There are various modes of hunting the Moose, detailed accounts of which would be, I fear, too tedious. The first and most usual way is to approach the animals on snow-shoes or on foot, as only a hunter

* The manuscript of this paper was received from Mr. Lockhart in 1865, while he was an officer of the Hudson Bay Company, of London, and has been preserved in the archives of the Smithsonian Institution. Between 1860 and 1870 Mr. Lockhart made many valuable contributions to the National Museum, including insects, birds, mammals, and fossils from Mackenzie River, Alaska, Great Slave Lake, and Hudson Bay Territory. For more than thirty years the Hudson Bay Company has zealously co-operated with the Smithsonian Institution in increasing the ethnological and natural-history collections of the National Museum. The objects thus received from Mr. Robert MacFarlane, Mr. Lockhart and other agents of the company have added greatly to our scientific knowledge of British North America.

knows how, and shoot them. The old men who are not able to walk much in deep snow make a kind of fence of three poles tied equidistant from each other, a little taller than a man, stretching perhaps for two days' march between lakes or a lake and a river, or between two mountains, or in any particular place where the Moose are accustomed to pass. Spaces are left vacant here and there in this fence, and in these snares are set. In autumn, during the rutting season, the hunter carries with him the clean, dried shoulder-blade of a Moose, and when he hears the call of the male Moose, which is audible at a distance of several miles, he rubs the shoulder-blade against a small, dry tree and imitates the call of the male. The Moose as soon as he hears the sound imagines, no doubt, that it is another Moose, and runs in the direction, till met by a shot. The male is very dangerous at that season, especially when wounded.

Many years ago, before guns and ammunition found their way into this country, the Indians used to build snow embankments near favorite feeding places, and lie hid there for days until a Moose should chance to pass near, when they would kill him with arrows.

I have been told that they run the Moose with horses in the plain country along the Saskatchewan. So long as the Moose keeps his trot a horse can not catch him, but if he can be forced into a gallop he soon becomes blown, and is then easily overtaken. The hunter uses every precaution, and having approached as near as possible to the animal, unperceived, he mounts, and putting his horse to its utmost speed generally surprises the animal so as to make it break into a gallop.

All Indians in the north have certain superstitious notions regarding the Moose. I have tried hard to prevail upon the Chippewyans to bring me some heads and horns, but without success. The reason for this is that the Indian women during their menses are not permitted to eat or even touch a Moose head, for should they do so they firmly believe that the captor will kill no more that winter. They say that this has been remarked and proved since time immemorial. Now there are many women in the Fort, and they are continually going about from house to house, and, it may be, sitting and driving about on the dogsleds upon which a head would require to be placed if brought from a distance. A head and horns brought to the Fort, cleaned and preserved, would doubtless be visited and handled by women, and if any of them should happen to be in the proscribed state it would finish the hunting success of the Indian who killed the Moose that year. At other times the women, as well as their husbands, handle and eat the heads. The Loucheux of Peel River and the Yukon are strict only with regard to the first Moose an Indian kills after having starved for a period. Of this the women are scarcely allowed to taste, and on no account must they taste the head. These Indians have no objection to part with Moose heads, if assured that no portion, even of the refuse,

will be given to a dog to eat. They can not be prevailed upon to bring young ones to the Fort alive, although many are caught every spring while crossing rivers and lakes. They say that this would spoil their hunting altogether; but why, I could never get one to explain; probably the idea has some connection with the superstitions entertained among the Chippewyans regarding the women.

In spring, when the females are near calving, they proceed to places where they are least likely to be disturbed by wolves, such as islands in lakes and rivers, and also in prairies and large swamps which are overflowed with water at that season; there they search for a dry spot among thick woods where they may bring forth their young. When the calves are very young the mother in their defense will even attack a man. At such times her appearance reminds one forcibly of that of a vicious horse. She raises her head, throws back her ears upon her neck, and sniffs or blows like a horse; then she bounds toward her enemy, striking the ground with her fore feet, her eyes glittering with rage.

When the snow happens to be very deep Moose are run down on snow-shoes and killed with arrows. In spring, when there is a crust, accidents frequently happen in this species of hunting. If the hunter chance, from the nature of the country, to run too near the Moose, after he is fatigued, he will turn like lightning, leap toward his assailant, and trample him under foot. I have known several people who had very narrow escapes of this kind. On one occasion three Indians were hunting and fell upon the tracks of a female Moose and her young one. They immediately gave chase, and in a short time the "Mannisheesh," or young one, became fatigued and stopped. One of the Indians who had left his companions a short distance behind, approached in his haste too near the game. The young Moose instantly leaped towards him. In his eagerness to escape his snow-shoe caught in a willow, and down he went with the Moose on top of him bucking and trampling with all four feet. His companions came up. The Moose again took to flight, and they went to pull out of the snow what they were quite certain would be a mangled corpse, but the man had scarcely received a scratch, so they shook him, and joining in a hearty laugh started again in pursuit.

The Moose down at Peel River and the Yukon are much larger than up this way. There I have known two cases of extraordinary Moose having been killed, the meat alone of each of them weighing about 1,000 pounds. The Louchenx have a superstition that the Indian who meets with one of these extraordinarily large Moose is sure to die within the year, or else meet with some grievous misfortune.

A north wind in winter, when the sun does not rise high above the horizon, affords the best chance for Moose hunting. From some cause which I do not understand, the sun being then towards the south, shining against the wind, causes the tracks to be seen from a considerable

distance. The hunter thus sees from a distance in which direction the Moose has gone and acts accordingly. When the winds come from the east, west, or south, the tracks can rarely be distinguished more than a few yards off, and thus frequently they start the game in an unexpected quarter, without being able to get a shot.

Moose rise and feed at dawn. About sunrise they again lie down to chew the cud or sleep till 10 or 11 o'clock. Then they feed till 2 o'clock in the afternoon, again lie down till 4 or 5 o'clock, then feed till dusk, when they lie down for the night.

They generally lie down with their tails to windward, trusting to their senses of hearing and smelling, which are remarkably acute, to warn them of approaching danger from that quarter; they can use their eyes to warn them from danger to leeward, where hearing, and especially smelling, would be of little use.

While sleeping or chewing the cud their ears are in perpetual motion, one backward, the other forward, alternately. They also have the remarkable instinct to make a short turn and sleep below the wind of their fresh track, so that any one falling thereon and following it up is sure to be heard or smelt before he can get within shooting distance.